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REFORM OF THE UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

Report of the United Nations Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements to the Secretary-General

Note by the secretariat

The secretariat has the honour to circulate, in the annex to the present note, the summary of the work of the United Nations Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements by Klaus Töpfer, dated 28 July 1998.

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Annex

UNITED NATIONS TASK FORCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Summary by Klaus Töpfer, United Nations Under-Secretary-General, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) (Habitat) and Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi 1/

The United Nations Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements was proposed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his seminal report on Reform "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform". The Task Force met four times under my chairmanship and completed its deliberations on 15 July 1998. The Task Force took as its departure point the conviction of the Secretary-General that the United Nations must take the lead "in building a new international system through greater unity of purpose, greater coherence of efforts and greater agility in responding to an increasingly dynamic and complex world". In this regard, the Task Force also shared a common conviction that the institutional fragmentation and loss of policy coherence over the last few years had resulted in a loss of effectiveness in the work of the United Nations in the area of environment and human settlements.

The contribution of the Task Force to developing the institutional response to environmental and human settlements challenges has to be seen in the new international context within which the United Nations operates.

In this regard, following the end of the Cold War and the advent of a multi-polar international order and its rapidly shifting political environment, we have to come to terms with emerging trends that have far-reaching implications for international cooperation. The first is the globalization and liberalization of the world economy, which is causing major transformations in the patterns of world economic interdependence.

The rapid globalization of financial and capital markets with their attendant instabilities, the major changes in the content and direction of international trade, the rapid spread of technological innovations, the new challenges that nation States face as political units in being able to control the changes taking place, the emergence of new and influential actors including transnational corporations and non-governmental organizations, as well as the growing strength and new modes of expression of civil society at all levels, all pose challenges and opportunities to the international community.

We must also, however, realize that, while the new international order increases interaction among all States, it maintains deep divisions between different groups of countries and between people within countries. It effectively segregates a large portion of the world's population and prevents it from sharing and benefits provided by technological and scientific

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advances. The emergence of a disjointed world economy and divided global society must not be seen as an inescapable condition: instead we must seize the opportunities that exist to foster a new spirit of international cooperation based on a realistic assessment of our common interests.

It is in this context that all countries, developed and developing, face the challenge of environmental sustainability, in the awareness that we can no longer blindly trust in the regenerative capacity of ecosystems. The problems of environmental sustainability and resource use are closely linked to social demands, demographic pressures and poverty in developing countries, counterposed against the excessive and often wasteful consumption habits in developed countries.

One characteristic common to practically all developing countries is the mismatch between financial resources and social, environmental and economic demands. In particular, as social demand for housing, nutrition, health and education grow, the financial capacity to meet them is diminishing rapidly, especially for countries burdened by debt.

These trends bring into sharp relief the urgent need for sustainable development based on meeting social, environmental and economic requirements. Sustainable development efforts will, in the coming millennium, face an increasingly heterogenous set of situations as we come to the realization that general recipes no longer work. We need differentiated approaches, tailor-made solutions and specific answers which correspond more closely to unique circumstances, problems and situations. To achieve this and to make real progress in sustainable development will place enormous demands on policy design and implementation capacities at all levels.

A critical element of the sustainable development equation is the need to confront the relentless destruction of our planet's natural resources, increasing transboundary pollution and new global environmental problems that are creating flashpoints in international relations. We have to come to the realization that our world is being threatened either because people have too much or too little. The pollution of poverty remains one of the most destructive and inhumane forces on this planet.

Compounding national and international ecological degradation is the trend in environmental degradation at a planetary level. Ozone layer depletion, the prospect of global warming, increased toxic pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, the loss of freshwater resources, the proliferation of hazardous wastes are only some of the chronic problems we face for which we need institutions equal to the unprecedented task facing humanity: to slow down, stop and ultimately reverse the wasting of our planet.

If we allow these trends to continue unabated, new tensions will be created which will imperil the political stability of the world. The greatest danger will be that we will fail to see the environmental dimensions behind new conflicts and will seek resolution by force. We must accept that our notion of what constitutes "security" remains stubbornly narrow. The time has come to recognize the environmental dimension of individual and collective security. We must also realize that national, regional and global security are indivisible and that if we are to tackle environmental trends

with serious implications for security, there is no alternative to the fostering of political will and global cooperation and the generation of new resources to an extent far beyond anything seen today.

On the part of developing countries, far-reaching initiatives will be required to stop forest destruction, establish biological reserves, pursue environmentally sustainable energy and industrial policies and conserve land and water resources. This will require those countries to take decisions which have political and social risks. While the leadership to take these decisions must come from the developing countries themselves, the developed countries must assist. Global efforts for environmental protection must be part of a broader commitment by developed countries to help developing countries realize their economic aspirations. If decision makers in developing countries believe that they can create jobs and meet economic objectives while addressing international and domestic environmental problems, their cooperation can be assured. These understandings between North and South must transcend the traditional environmental agenda and incorporate initiatives as diverse as international trade and debt, development and assistance, energy and technology transfer. In short, they must make development environmentally, economically and socially sustainable.

If we accept the above propositions, we must also rethink the role of multilateral institutions and review their capacity to address these issues. It is precisely in this perspective that the proposals of the Task Force must be viewed.

Twenty-five years after the historic Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, which established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and more than five years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, the elevation of environment on the international political agenda has led to a proliferation of new programmes and institutional arrangements designed to address environmental concerns, often without coordination. The international community must begin to address in a coherent manner whether, in the new international political context at the end of the twentieth century, the institutions it has put in place to manage the critical questions related to the environmental integrity and sustainability of the planet have the capacity to deal with those problems in all their immensity.

In its more than twenty-five years of existence, UNEP has seen some impressive achievements, including rapid advances in scientific knowledge of environmental threats and the development of international policy and legal instruments, as well as national and regional institutions to respond to those threats. This work, however, has primarily taken a sectoral or issue-based approach. In the five years since Rio, we have struggled to inject the concept of environmental and social sustainability into the way we design and implement our economic development plans but, so far, with only moderate success.

In a similar vein, the United Nations Conference in Vancouver in 1976 imparted a sense of urgency to the political leadership towards the process of urbanization. It stressed the moral imperative - to improve the living

conditions of the urban poor through better architectural designs, low cost housing and appropriate technologies. It translated the concern for human settlements by establishing national ministries of urban development.

The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul identified the connections among the political, economic, environmental and social factors intrinsic to equitable and sustainable development of human settlements. The Conference was a watershed in the emergence of a new vision of urban development.

Ever since we initiated these conscious and cooperative ventures to rationally manage earth's natural resources and human settlements, we are still confronted with indisputable evidence that the struggle to keep our planet habitable is still at a critical juncture.

The continuum that spans the Vancouver Conference with Habitat II at Istanbul has also been marked by far-reaching changes. The process of globalization of economic markets and trade has created new patterns of economic competition and environmental problems. Urban based economies now contribute a major share of GDP in most countries.

From an economic standpoint, urbanization has led in some cases to improved standards of living from higher household incomes. From an environmental perspective, this growth has been achieved in the face of rapid urban deterioration. Urban environmental conditions are central to the economic prospects of all countries. It must be recognized that environment affects the productivity of labour through its impact on health, the availability of clean water, air and land.

As with other patterns of resource use on our planet today, the outstanding characteristic of urbanization is the great disparity between the conditions of the rich and the poor. The problems of urban environmental degradation are not the results of urban poor's attempt to make room in cities for their survival, but reflect the inability of the institutional structures to cope with their needs.

The solution of environmental problems and implementation of sustainable development provides a unique opportunity for integrating social and economic concerns with the ecological, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the natural and built environment.

In the final analysis, the environment is a political issue. Whether or not solutions are effectively applied will continue to rely upon politics and policy, upon the aptitude of leaders, parties and their constituents and upon a complex cross-referencing and cooperative system involving international agencies, national environmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international conventions and agreements.

The report of the United Nations Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements which was presented to the Secretary-General on 15 June 1998 is an attempt at addressing the commonly held conviction that the institutional fragmentation and lack of policy coherence over the last twenty years had resulted in a loss of effectiveness in the work of the United Nations in the area of the environment and human settlements.

The group of distinguished policy makers, academics and members of the non-governmental community who formed the Task Force examined the existing organizational arrangements of the United Nations to determine how they might be changed to better meet international environmental and human settlements challenge.

The goal of the Task Force was to make recommendations about how the existing United Nations structures and arrangements in the field of the environment and human settlements could be optimally designed to deal with the problems that will concern the global community in the next decade.

In making its recommendations, the Task Force took the approach that what was required to address the immediate needs for revitalizing the work of the United Nations in the environment and human settlements area was an incremental and practical approach that could be implemented in the short to medium term and had the likelihood of finding political consensus around its objectives. In my view, the recommendations contained in the report should be seen as the commencement of a longer term approach to equip the United Nations to concretely address the pervasive environmental and sustainable development problems both of the present as well as of the future. In this regard, the recommendations of the Task Force provide the first important building blocks to allow us to begin to shape the institutions that would be capable of meeting the immense challenges that the international community will face in the next century.

The main findings of the report are reflected in 24 recommendations contained in the seven chapters of the report spanning inter-agency, intergovernmental and programmatic issues and are designed to enhance coordinated action by the United Nations and begin the process of improving overall policy coherence. Decisions concerning the implementation of the recommendations fall within distinct areas, some within the purview of the Secretary-General or the Executive Director of UNEP, while others accrue to the General Assembly or the governing bodies of UNEP and UNCHS (Habitat). The recommendations will undoubtedly be debated at some length, but again, in my view, they represent the sum of the measures that require to be taken now to revitalize the essential work of the United Nations on environment and human settlements.

The first set of recommendations has to do with improving the inter agency coordination within the United Nations. One of the paradoxes inherent in the concept of sustainable development is the need to ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into broader economic and development policies. Sustainable development is a whole greater than its parts. And this is a task that no one agency can do on its own. But at the same time there is always the danger of environmental issues getting immersed in competing and often contradictory claims. Clarification of the roles of the many players in the environment and sustainable development arena is therefore crucial if we are to prove equal to the ecological challenges that we face today.

The Task Force was convinced that there was significant overlapping and lack of coordinated action in the United Nations framework concerning environment and human settlements policies. The Task Force recommended the establishment of an inter-agency Environment Management Group which would use

an "issue management approach" that had been outlined by the Secretary-General in his report on "Renewing the United Nations". The Environmental Management Group will be chaired by the Executive Director of UNEP and would be designed to be a problem solving, results-oriented approach to achieving effective coordination and joint action on key environmental and human settlements issues throughout the United Nations systems. An important innovation would be the inclusion of non-United Nations international institutions on the development of specific issues.

The second important set of recommendations deals with the different conventions and protocols on the environment. One of the central mechanisms by which international cooperation can be fostered is through the negotiation and agreement of international laws aimed at fostering the sustainable management of shared and common property resources.

After Rio, the development of a distinct international law of the environment has been nothing less than remarkable. The total number of such agreements is rising whilst the average time taken to negotiate each treaty is steadily decreasing. Moreover, within the same time frame, the scale of problems to be addressed has widened - from the regional through the hemispheric to the global - while the total number of sovereign states that have to sit down to broker such deals has gradually burgeoned. New concerns and principles - precaution, inter and intragenerational equity, scientific uncertainty, sustainable development - have also arisen in recent years and now need to be factored into the negotiation process.

Clearly, the various conventions and protocols on the environment represent the most outstanding achievement of the global community to date. But the Task Force noted the lack of coordination amongst the conventions though there were many areas of common concern and distinct overlappings. The geographic dispersal of the various environmental convention secretariats is addressed, with the report suggesting their clustering and possible future co-location, as well as the possibility of negotiating umbrella conventions. Concern was expressed regarding the dispersal of environmental convention secretariats (such as in Bonn, Geneva, Montreal, Nairobi), which has resulted in inefficiencies, substantial costs through loss of economies of scale and fragmentation of common services. The Task Force recommends that governments and the conventions' conferences of Parties consider the implications of these inefficiencies and additional costs and seek ways of addressing these problems. It also calls on UNEP to build its scientific and information capacity and networking in support of the conventions.

The third set of recommendations relates to Nairobi as the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. Both these institutions have now been headquartered in Nairobi for 25 and 20 years respectively. The recommendation was not to merge these two institutions. They should continue to exist as two independent entities, but their work should be more integrated in administrative terms and take advantage of synergies at the programme level. There should only be one person responsible for UNEP, UNCHS (Habitat) and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The Task Force emphasized that it was essential for the United Nations system to have a stable and strengthened headquarters in Nairobi and the elevation of the status of Nairobi to the

same level as other headquartered stations in Geneva and Vienna. The Task Force also made a clear recommendation concerning the improvement of information and communication technologies and the achievement of a better security situation in Nairobi and Kenya.

The fourth major set of recommendations of the Task Force relates to the intergovernmental framework. There have been complaints that ministers of the environment and human settlements had to travel too much around the world to attend conventions and high level segments of international negotiations. Clearly, it was not possible for the ministers to be available for each one of them. In order to enhance intergovernmental policy coherence it recommends that an annual, ministerial-level, global environmental forum be convened biennially as part of the regular session of the UNEP Governing Council in Nairobi. In alternate years, this forum should be a special session of the Council and held in different venues, alternating between regions, and should provide a platform for governments to regularly discuss and take action on important and emerging environmental and sustainable development issues. Regional issues would be included in the agendas of alternate meetings, which should be held before the meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development which would also assist in providing a coordinated environmental input into the work of the commission.

The fifth important issue was information, monitoring and assessment. The Task Force recognized the critical need for monitoring and assessment leading to information for decision-making and recommended that UNEP and UNCHS (Habitat) further develop their capacity to serve as an "environmental guardian" and transform Earthwatch into an effective, accessible science based system that meets the needs of decision makers. This could include the participation of non-governmental sources and the elaboration of result oriented indicators in the field of the environment and human settlements. This monitoring and assessment system should maximize its ability to provide early warning of possible environmental and human settlements emergencies and the basis for the development of measures for conflict prevention.

In my view, the need for such information systems is an urgent necessity, particularly in view of the nature of emerging issues that have to be dealt with in a timely manner. In particular, an early warning system that would help to mitigate the effects of recent emergencies such as forest fires and the massive environmental and financial cost involved is a necessity for the international community.

The sixth important issue relates to the participation of civil society. In all the millions of words written about the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, very little attention has been paid to the fact that governments committed themselves to a political strategy for mobilizing their people and educating them on the need for a transition to sustainable development, through popular involvement in national and local level strategies for implementing the transition.

Chapter after chapter in Agenda 21, on issues such as poverty, urban settlements, health, population control as well as the mountain development, forestry, desertification, biodiversity, agriculture, management of water resources and the management of toxic wastes, national and local governments are committed to educate and work in consultation with local communities. The conclusions of the Earth Summit went well beyond a focus on non-governmental organizations, to develop a strategy for the involvement of much wider layers of society from transnationals down to local communities.

There are encouraging signs in the empowerment of communities and the growth of environment-oriented non-governmental organizations in civil society and their increasing recognition in all regions as powerful mechanisms to advance sustainable development. The Task Force recommended a greater involvement of non-governmental organizations as well as other major groups, such as industry, business and trade unions in the inter-governmental process. There were clear recommendations to involve these groups in inter-governmental deliberations and to develop further programmatic relationships utilizing the various perspectives of these groups.

The final set of recommendations provides for a more open and forward looking process to address issues of the future. The Task Force proposed that wide-ranging consultations be undertaken by the UNEP Executive Director concerning institutional arrangements for dealing with the environmental and human settlements challenges of the next century. These consultations would include representatives of governments, civil society and the private sector and would culminate in two-day "environment forum" to be held early next year. This forum would then provide forward-looking proposals for the protection of the global environment, including future institutions, to the forthcoming Millennium Assembly and Forum in the year 2000.

I will be putting in place a flexible process through which innovative ideas and proposals can be discussed widely among government representatives, non-governmental organizations the scientific and academic community and others with a view to making the "environment forum" an innovative source of ideas and proposals to contribute to the forthcoming Millennium Assembly and Forum.

In conclusion, therefore, the recommendations of the Task Force for strengthening the environmental and human settlements work of the United Nations may not be revolutionary, but should be seen as the first practical steps in laying the foundations of the institutions that are required for the next century. It is my hope that this will be the context in which they are discussed, in an open and honest manner, and that this provides the basis for the further essential work we still have to undertake internally within UNEP and UNCHS (Habitat) to make these institutions worthy of the support of the international community.

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